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ARTICLE XIII.

THE SUMERO-AKKADIAN QUESTION.

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At a comparatively early period in the history of Assyriology it became evident to investigators that the cuneiform tablets of Assyria and Babylonia presented not only a Semitic language, but also, alongside of it, an idiom differing widely from the Semitic type both in grammar and in vocabulary. A peculiar feature of this latter idiom was the fact that it was written for the most part in ideograms, with which were combined certain phonetic elements, serving to indicate the proper pronunciation of words and to constitute grammatical forms. In structure it bore some resemblance to the so-called Turanian group, and at all events was distinctly agglutinative. The numerous texts composed in it were, with exception of the inscriptions of some early Babylonian kings, almost exclusively of a religious character, consisting of hymns, penitential psalms, charms, exorcisms, and magical formulæ of various sorts, usually accompanied by an interlinear or parallel Semitic version. It was further found that the old Assyrian and Babylonian scholars had devoted much attention to the study of this language, and had composed a considerable number of lexicographical and grammatical works for its elucidation.

This non-Semitic idiom received from the earlier Assyriologists various names—Sumerian, Akkadian, Proto-Babylonian, Proto-Chaldean—and was regarded by them as the speech of a people who preceded the Semites in Babylonia, invented the cuneiform system of writing, and laid the foundations of Babylonian civilization. From this ancient people, it was believed, the Semitic immigrants or invaders derived their civilization, and in large measure also their religious conceptions; so that when, in course of time, the Semitic element of the population

and the Semitic language became predominant, the old tongue was preserved as a ritual language, holding the same place that Latin holds to-day in the Roman Catholic church. This would explain the fact that the great majority of the non-Semitic texts are of a religious nature, as also the zeal of the Assyro-Babylonian priestly scholars in its study and preservation. Such, down to the year 1874, was the general opinion on the subject; the only material points respecting which scholars were at all at variance was the minor one of nomenclature.

In 1874, however, the distinguished French epigraphist Joseph Halévy propounded a novel theory, which he has since defended with great ability. According to him, the so-called Akkadian or Sumerian people are a pure myth; no such people ever existed. The Semites were the real inventors of cuneiform writing, which, originally ideographic, was in course of time developed into a phonetic system, just as is the case with Egyptian. The priests, however, in order to lend an air of greater mystery to their sacred writings and render them incomprehensible to the profane vulgar, devised a most ingenious and complicated system of cryptography. Taking the old Semitic ideograms as its basis, they assigned to them conventional phonetic values and meanings, and, adding to them certain arbitrarily chosen signs to represent pronouns, particles, and grammatical forms, they invented, not a new language, but a mysterious allographic method of writing the Semitic Assyro-Babylonian. The priestly method Halévy styles Hieratic, the ordinary method Demotic. These views were earnestly combatted by the upholders of the older theory, and, though the question has been vigorously debated down to the present time, the battle is still in progress.

In 1880 a new feature was introduced into the controversy by the discovery that the non-Semitic language appeared in two different forms, each possessing certain peculiarities; that one of these forms was the language of the hymns and penitential psalms, and the other that of the incantations; and that this difference had been recognized by the old Assyrian priestly scholars, who had drawn up special vocabularies for the explanation of the two forms, to one of which, the idiom of the penitential psalms, they applied the technical designation of *eme sal*, generally translated 'female (or woman's) language.' At first the difference was regarded as dialectic, some Assyriologists holding that the *eme sal* was the dialect of Sumer or Southern Babylonia, and that the incantations were composed in that of Akkad or in Northern-Babylonian, while others held that the incantations were South-Babylonian or Sumerian, and the penitential psalms North-Babylonian or

Akkadian. Later, however, the theory was introduced that the difference was not local but temporal; that the idiom of the incantations was the older, and should be styled Old Sumerian or simply Sumerian; and that the penitential psalms presented a later form of the language of the incantations, to be designated as Neo-Sumerian.*

To sum up the whole question in a few words, the Sumerists hold that Sumerian was a real language, spoken by the primitive inhabitants of Babylonia, and appearing in two forms differing from each other either locally or temporally; while the position of J. Halévy and other anti-Sumerists, whose ranks have been strengthened by such distinguished scholars as the late Stanislas Guyard of Paris and Prof. Friedrich Delitzsch of Leipzig, is that it was no language at all, but merely a figment of the priestly class, a pure cryptography.

It is obviously beyond the scope of a brief paper like this to attempt to decide a question which has been debated by able scholars for many years. It may, however, be allowable to present some of the principal arguments on each side, and to offer some considerations as to the manner in which the question must finally be decided.

The chief arguments brought forward by the anti-Sumerists against the existence of a Sumerian language and in favor of the Semitic origin of cuneiform writing are as follows:—

1. If, they say, such a people really existed, and played such an important part in the civilization of the Semites, why are they never mentioned in the cuneiform inscriptions? Why have they left no memorials of themselves in the shape of temples, sculptures, or inscriptions?

2. We find that a considerable number of the phonetic values of cuneiform characters are indubitably of Semitic origin, being derived from the initial syllables of the Semitic words they ideographically represent. To illustrate this by a few examples:—The characters which, as phonograms, have the values of *iç*, *bit*, *ša*, *dan*, *cab*, are identical with the characters which, as ideograms, represent respectively the Semitic words *içu* ‘wood,’ *bitu* ‘house,’ *šakānu* ‘make,’ *dannu* ‘mighty,’ and *câbu* ‘soldier.’ Nor does this occur in only a few cases, or even in comparatively few cases; it is true in a considerable number of instances. If then we could trace back to its source every phonetic value, it is more reasonable, they say, to infer that all would be found to proceed from a Semitic origin than to assume a derivation from another idiom.

* Cf. remarks of Prof. Haupt in *Proc. Am. Or. Soc.*, vol. xiii., p. xlviij.

3. The so-called Sumerian contains such a large proportion of genuine, although more or less thinly disguised, Semitic words as to exclude the idea of simple borrowing. The theory of the existence of Sumerian therefore falls to the ground, since the remaining words which cannot now be referred to Semitic roots, either in Assyrian or in the cognate languages, may really be good Semitic words from obsolete roots, or may be purely conventional words invented by the priests.

4. In the matter of grammar, Sumerian, it is claimed, presents many points of contact with Assyrian. It possesses a *šu* stem and a *ta-an* stem, corresponding with the Assyrian *šafel* and stems with infixed *t*; its adverbial ending is *eš*, corresponding to the Assyrian adverbial ending *iš*; Sumerian '*ge*', like Assyrian *lā*, is not only a precative but an emphatic particle, and moreover '*ge-a* . . . '*ge'a*', like *lā* . . . *lā*', means 'whether . . . or'; Sumerian, like Assyrian, has suffix pronouns. The inference is plain that such forms can only be due to a conscious imitation of Semitic grammar. Such briefly are the principal arguments on which the anti-Sumerists rest their case.

The Sumerists answer as follows :

1. Even if it were true that the Sumerians are never mentioned and that they have left no traces, nothing would be proved thereby. Babylonia has been as yet only partially explored, and ample memorials of this people may come to light at any day. But it is not true. The Sumerians are mentioned in the cuneiform texts, and there are numerous traces of them in Babylonia. If Hammurabi had bilingual inscriptions composed in Semitic and Sumerian, it was certainly not with the view of concealing their meaning. The statues found at Tel-Loh by M. de Sarzac are decidedly not of a Semitic type, and can only be regarded as memorials of the ancient Sumerians.

That many characters possess Semitic phonetic values is precisely what we might expect. No one can suppose that the Semites simply appropriated the Sumerian system of writing without any modification. They must necessarily have adapted it to the needs of their language and its phonetic system. That in the process of adaptation new phonetic values were introduced, and these too derived from the Semitic values of the ideograms, was most natural. Moreover, almost invariably the Sumerian phonetic value was retained alongside of the Semitic. Taking the examples cited above, we have :

ic, Ass. *iču*; but Sum. *giš* = 'wood.'

bit, Ass. *bítu*; but Sum. *e* = 'house.'

ša, Ass. *šakánu*; but Sum. *gar* = 'make.'

dan, Ass. *dannu*; but Sum. *kala* = 'mighty.'

cab, Ass. *čábu*; but Sum. *erim* = 'soldier.'

That many Semitic words are to be found in Sumerian is an undoubted fact ; but their number is greatly less than is claimed by the anti-Sumerists. It is acknowledged by all that nearly all the Sumerian texts we possess may have been composed, long after the language had ceased to be spoken, by priestly scholars who acquired it as a learned accomplishment, and that, just as in the case of mediæval Latin, many foreign words would naturally creep in. But the anti-Sumerists have been led to extremes by the craze for Semitic etymologies, and have made many palpable errors.

2. As regards the grammar, the resemblance is merely superficial. The *šu* and *ta-an* stems by no means coincide with the Assyrian *šafel* and stems with infix *t*. Many languages possess suffix-prepositions. The other resemblances are either accidental or due to the Semitic environments of the scribes. To offset these superficial resemblances, there remains the fact that the whole structure of Akkadian grammar is radically different from that of Assyrian.

This, then, is the position of the Sumerists, and they do little more than attempt to refute the arguments of their opponents. In fact, the whole treatment of the question by both sides is far from satisfactory. The anti-Sumerists seek to draw deductions from a number of isolated examples, and from the inherent probabilities of the case. The Sumerists, as a rule, assuming the correctness of their views, throw the burden of proof upon their adversaries, and content themselves with refuting the arguments they advance. Something more than this is necessary. Dr. Lehmann, it is true, in his *Samušumukin* (which has recently appeared), seems to recognize this, and devotes considerable space to establishing the fact that Sumerian possesses a definite phonetic and syntactic system, radically different from the Assyrian. Even this is not sufficient, as such conditions are by no means incompatible with the theory of artificiality.

The arguments outlined above are useful as corroborative testimony, but they do not go down to the root of the matter.

The question can only be decided on the basis of the idiom itself. If Sumerian was ever a living language, it must present the phenomena of a living language. If it does this, no amount of loan-words, however large, can invalidate its claim to a real existence. Modern Persian has borrowed so freely from Arabic as to give rise to the saying that any good Arabic word is a good Persian word ; yet it will never be considered a Semitic language. The question then resolves itself into this : does Sumerian present those organic phenomena which are characteristic of living speech ?

1. As to its phonology—Do we find instances of assimilation, dissimilation, vowel-harmony, or other changes dependent on the adjacent sounds?

2. As to its vocabulary—Do the Sumerian words present characteristic concepts? Or, as it must be studied through the medium of Assyrian, the question can be put in another form: are the same Sumerian words invariably rendered by the same Assyrian words in the way of a mere slavish reproduction? Or are they rendered by different words, according to the shade of meaning to be expressed, so that they clearly represent individually concepts peculiar to their idiom? In other words, are there such differences of rendering as always occur in translating—say from German into English?

3. As to the forms—Do the same Sumerian always correspond to the same Assyrian grammatical forms? Or do we find such differences as may justly be considered due to a difference in the organization of the two languages? For example, do we find cases in which the same Sumerian verb-forms are variously rendered in Assyrian, and vice versa?

4. As to the syntax—Is the Sumerian sentence merely modeled on the Assyrian? or does it possess characteristics which can find their analogy in any living speech?

5. How far does Semitism on the part of the scribe enter into cases of resemblance? and, on the other hand, to what extent does the Sumerian influence Assyrian translation?

It is on these lines, and these alone, that the question can be definitely settled. The whole bilingual literature must be carefully gone over, and all instances bearing on the above points collected. The mass of material thus gathered must be thoroughly sifted, and all doubtful cases eliminated. When this work is done, and the results have been tabulated and studied, we shall be in a position to draw our conclusions with the least possibility of error, and to settle definitely the much vexed Sumero-Akkadian question.